

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE MY STUDENTS TO WRITE?

As Zemelman & Daniels (1988) point out, “If students are engaged with explaining something they care about to an audience they truly wish to reach, in a classroom where they know their ideas will be respected, they’re more likely to write without hesitation” (p. 165). With this same idea in mind, Dornan, Rosen, & Wilson (2003) encourage teachers to create a classroom atmosphere where students have some authority over topic choices, where teachers focus on what students *can* do to build on successes, where teachers share their own writing and writing processes with their students, and where teachers refuse to allow verbal or non-verbal put-downs of student writing.

One of the primary ways to encourage students to write is to provide a safe and supportive atmosphere for writing in the classroom. A classroom is safe and supportive for writing when writing is purposeful, students are encouraged to engage fully in the process, the teacher coaches students through the process when necessary, and expectations are reasonable, challenging, and clear.

MAKING WRITING PURPOSEFUL. Students generally respond more positively to assignments when they understand the value and purpose of the activity. One way to make the value and purpose apparent is to have students write for a real audience that will actually receive the writing. When students write letters to the editor, children’s books for elementary school students, interview questions for a veteran, program notes for a dance recital, or instructions for a bike repair to be used at a cycle shop, they may feel a greater motivation to write. However, even when the finished product won’t be shared beyond the classroom, teachers can help students see the goals of the assignment in order to understand what skills or concept knowledge the activity will help develop. And, if a writing assignment doesn’t have a clear purpose, the teacher may even reconsider why it is being assigned.

ENGAGING STUDENTS FULLY IN THE PROCESS. Rather than simply assigning a topic and collecting the final product, teachers can remind students that writing is a recursive process involving planning, acting, reflecting, and revising. Teachers can honor parts of the process by giving students the time and support necessary to engage in all parts of the process as appropriate. Students can be encouraged to take part in these parts of the process when the teacher allows class time, at least with early assignments, to model the writing process and help students understand how to engage in them. However, teachers also need to remind students that not all writing activities will need to go through all stages of the process.

COACHING STUDENTS. Teachers can provide support for students during the writing process by modeling writing, engaging students in writing conferences, responding to drafts in progress, coordinating the use of peer writing groups, or providing opportunities for individual reflection during the writing process. Students can be encouraged during coaching to grow as writers and thinkers through the use of targeted, specific praise and authentic, probing questions about their writing. Students receive little encouragement to write when the only feedback is primarily negative and only comes after the final composition has been submitted. Instead, teachers can be coaches who show interest in individual progress, individualize instruction appropriately, encourage development of specific skills in the context of the whole, and encourage the student to succeed by building on what he or she can already do.

MAKING EXPECTATIONS REASONABLE, CHALLENGING, AND CLEAR. One way to make expectations reasonable is to be aware of individual student needs, interests, and aptitudes. Writing assignments need to be developmentally appropriate for the particular students involved. However, students also need to be stretched beyond what they can do comfortably. Students can be challenged when teachers make each writing assignment take them a step further in their thinking, content knowledge, or writing skills. Assignments can also be made clear through class discussion about expectations and the use of a rubric which outlines the expectations and indicates how the final product will be evaluated. Involving students in the creation of grading criteria is a way to encourage class discussion about expectations as well as make sure the expectations are clear.